

The weekly briefing | 10 February 2014

Political and security risk updates

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Africa

Muslim civilians flee Central African Republic capital

Thousands of Muslims are fleeing Bangui, the capital of the Central African Republic (CAR), amid reports of public mutilations and cheering Christian crowds. Around 500 vehicles, guarded by soldiers from Chad, left the capital following two months of sectarian clashes between Christian militias and Muslims accused of collaborating with the armed Seleka rebels. Humanitarian organisations have reported that Muslim neighbourhoods in Bangui are being destroyed and even Muslims who had lived in the capital for generations appear to have decided to leave.

CAR is a predominantly Christian country, with a Muslim minority living mostly in the north, close to the borders with Muslim neighbours Chad and Sudan. As reports of the exodus emerged, the International Criminal Court (ICC) announced a preliminary investigation into potential war crimes and crimes against humanity in CAR. ICC prosecutor Fatou Bensouda described the situation on 7 February as having gone 'from bad to worse', with evidence of extreme brutality against civilians.

The situation of the refugees will further add to the humanitarian crisis in CAR, with the UN reporting that over 8,000 civilians had already fled to Cameroon. When an alliance of Muslim rebels overthrew President François Bozizé in March 2013, grievances were mostly focused on political and economic issues, rather than sectarian concerns. However, with increasingly violent clashes involving mercenaries from Chad and Sudan, relations between the Seleka and the Christian population worsened, causing the anti-Balaka Christian self-defence militias to begin a retaliation campaign. The ensuing fighting claimed the lives of more than one thousand people over a few days in December 2013. There presently appears to be little basis for interim president Catherine Samba-Panza to unite the country.



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Other developments

The trial of a former Rwandan army captain, charged with complicity in the 1994 genocide and crimes against humanity, has begun at a Paris court. Pascal Simbikangwa, who denies the charges, could face a life sentence if found guilty. He is accused of inciting and organising massacres and encouraging the Interahamwe Hutu militia to kill Tutsi civilians. The first of its kind in France, Rwanda's former colonial power, the trial is expected to last up to two months. France has previously been criticised for its slow response to the unfolding genocide, allegations of enabling suspects to enter France and thwarted attempts to bring perpetrators to justice.

The Libyan government announced on 4 February that all chemical weapons from the Muammar Gaddafi era had been destroyed. The process began in 2004 when Libya signed the Chemical Weapons Convention but had been interrupted by the revolution of 2011, when Gaddafi was overthrown by a NATO-backed uprising. It is hoped the destruction of the weapons will limit potential security risks in the country, which has remained unstable since the revolution. Foreign Minister Mohamed Abdelaziz stressed the international effort and technical assistance required for the destruction.

Eight miners have died in an accident in a gold mine near Johannesburg, South Africa, after a fire broke out on 4 February following an earthquake. With some of the deepest mines in the world in South Africa, government and industry actors have tried to improve workers' safety since the end of apartheid, but with mixed results. As the search for a missing worker continued, platinum producers said negotiations to end a two-week strike had broken down. Around 80,000 members of the Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (AMCU), who demand pay rises, have been on strike since 23 January. On 4 February, South African police stated they had been using rubber bullets against 3,000 striking workers. Meanwhile, President Jacob Zuma called elections for 7 May, which are expected to be closely contested, as the ruling African National Congress (ANC) faces decreasing levels of popularity and protests against poor government services across the country.

On the radar

- **The UN Security Council will consult on the situation in South Sudan** as clashes continue in the Jonglei area.
- **French energy company Areva is renegotiating the royalties it pays Niger for uranium mining operations** after admitting the country's demand for higher revenue was legitimate.

Americas

Ex-guerrilla leader takes lead in El Salvador presidential election

Former left-wing guerrilla leader Salvador Sanchez Cerén, of the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN), overtook his right-wing rival by an almost 10-point margin in the El Salvador presidential election on 2 February. The FMLN emerged during the El Salvador Civil War (1979-92) in opposition to the US-backed conservative governments. It first ascended to the presidency in 2009 under the leadership of FMLN moderate Carlos Mauricio Funes. Although Cerén was the favourite to succeed the outgoing President Funes, the results were well beyond the expected margin of victory. However, Cerén remained short of the 50% plus one vote needed to clinch victory. He will therefore face his opponent Norman Quijano, of the right-wing National Republican Alliance (Arena), in the run off on 9 March.

A major theme of the campaign was the rising threat of gang wars. A of violence in the country followed the deportation of thousands of Salvadorans from the United States in the mid-1990s, the majority of whom were part of criminal organisations. In 2012, the FMLN and Catholic Church brokered a landmark ceasefire between MS-13 and the 18th Street Gang, two of the most prominent rival gangs. As a result, the annual murder rate was slashed by around half. But last year, levels of violence started to increase, and it is suspected that the ceasefire has been secretly flouted. A significant portion of the population of El Salvador is directly or indirectly affiliated with gangs; it is estimated that 6% of the population rely on gang activities as a source of income. The two presidential candidates offer differing approaches to the gang problem: while Cerén has pledged to deepen the outgoing president's social programmes in impoverished areas, Quijano has called for the military to be deployed. In the past few months, Funes has distanced himself from the truce by adopting a more hardline approach.

In spite of the FMLN's good results in the first round of the presidential election, it is likely that Cerén will seek to foster new political alliances in order to ensure his victory in the run off. As such, he has approached the former centre-right president Antonio Saca who came third in the election with 11.4% of the vote. Saca was initially part of the Arena party until being expelled in 2009 and later creating his own party, the Grand Alliance for National Unity (GANU). During the election campaign, he was stained by an alleged case of corruption.

Other developments

The spying scandal exposed in Colombia reveals power struggle between the military and the government. A Colombian army unit was reported to have been spying on the ongoing government peace talks with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). According to the allegations, the unit has spied for more than a year on the talks taking place in Havana, Cuba. President Juan Manuel Santos has pledged to shed light on the 'dark forces' behind the operation. On 4 February, two army generals in charge of intelligence were suspended. Many army officers have criticised Santos's conciliatory approach to the FARC threat. It is suspected that the spying unit was part of a broader resistance within the army that opposes a peace settlement with FARC.

Clashes between protestors and police forces in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, underpin rising tensions ahead of the 2014 World Cup. A peaceful protest of around a thousand people in Rio de Janeiro's principal train station turned violent. The protest was called by the Free Pass movement, a civil organisation that is opposed to public transport fares. The police eventually managed to disperse the protestors late in the evening amid clashes with radical groups. The incident highlighted the lack of readiness of the police force. Around 100,000 policemen will be mobilised for the security of the World Cup from 12 June to 13 July.

The Mexican government has unveiled a new strategy for violence-ridden state of Michoacán. On 5 February, Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto announced the creation of a \$3.4 billion fund to tackle the problem of insecurity in the region. This funding is three times larger than the yearly state budget and will be used to invest in infrastructure and social programmes. The declaration comes a week after the government decided to regularise the civil militias operating in the state. Violence in Michoacán has deeply weakened the country's image at a time when the government is seeking much needed foreign investments.

On the radar

- **The second round of the presidential elections is to be held in El Salvador** on 9 March.
- **Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto is to meet US President Barack Obama and Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper in Toluca, Mexico**, on 19 February.
- **FARC has rejected a possible ceasefire** during legislative election in Colombia on 9 March.
- **Youth gatherings in shopping centres in Brazil's major cities are planned until at least 15 February.**
- **Potential for further protests in Buenos Aires, Argentina**, as residents demand that the government repair roads damaged by heavy rainfall and flooding.

Asia and Pacific

Thailand's anti-government protestors seek to win over farmers

Amid the numerous problems of Thai Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra, discontent among her key rural supporters is growing. The government has not yet paid a total of 140 billion baht to over a million farmers under its rice-pledging scheme. Under this scheme, the government promises to buy rice at an above-market price, but they have been unable to export the rice to raise funds. In response, road blockades and protests have erupted across the country. On 6 February, farmers desperately appealed to Thailand's king to intervene. Meanwhile, Suthep Thaugsuban's anti-government movement has been courting the rural protestors. He has personally led marches in Bangkok to raise money for farmers who have not yet been paid by the government for their crops.

The scheme is one of Yingluck's populist policies which helped her Pheu Thai Party win the 2011 general election. Rice farmers have been natural supporters of Yingluck's party, who have been able to raise living standards with policies such as cheap healthcare. Their support is a vital for Yingluck to maintain legitimacy against the middle-class protest movement in Bangkok. The protest movement is clearly trying to capitalise upon this opportunity for sympathising with rice farmers. However, it is unclear whether farmers' leaders are taking sides. For example, the head of the Thai Rice Farmers Association, Prasit Boonchoey, denied backing Thaugsuban. Rice growers are also unsure against whom they should direct their blame.

Support and legitimacy is clearly eroding from Yingluck's Pheu Thai Party. The Thailand Development Research Institute has recommended that the government sell rice stockpiles at a deflated price to pay its outstanding debts, and then suspend the rice-pledging project in the long term. This is a possible solution, but will lead to widespread embarrassment and the admission that populism is unaffordable. The snap election of 2 February was disrupted and the opposition boycotted the ballot. With turnout of 47.7 percent, the opposition argue that legitimacy has not been conferred to Yingluck. The electoral commission is planning a re-continuation of the election on May and it seems that Yingluck's government will be returned with a significantly lower vote margin. Until then, a caretaker government with limited spending powers will continue for weeks.

Other developments

Two Myanmar political party chiefs have escaped an apparent assassination attempt in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, on 8 February. Aye Maung, of the Rakhine Nationalities Development Party, and Aye Thar Aung, of the Arakan League for Democracy, were fired upon by attackers on a motorcycle. Analysts believe this may have been retaliation by Rohingya Muslims, a minority group who have fled to Malaysia to escape persecution in Buddhist-majority Myanmar. The investigation continues.

North and South Korea have agreed to re-continue the bilateral agreement to hold cross-border gatherings for the elderly. This is expected to take place from 20 to 25 February. These gatherings are largely seen as a litmus test for improvements in North-South relations. However, Pyongyang has repeatedly threatened to rethink the agreement and has renewed calls for the cancellation of South Korea's regular military exercises with the United States. The family reunions have not been held since 2010 amid strained ties due to North Korea's nuclear ambitions.

On the radar

- **The results of Tokyo's election for governor will be returned on 10 February.**
- **The Philippines hopes to settle the diplomatic rift with Hong Kong over the 2010 hostage crisis** with a 'generous' compensation pay-out.
- **The final round of the election of Nepal's prime minister takes place on 10 February.**
- **Myanmar will investigate an incident on 13 January** when a police officer died and alleged arson occurred in western Rakhine state.
- **South Korea's defence ministry will announce the schedule for joint military exercises with the United States this week.**

Europe

Violent protests spread across Bosnia-Herzegovina

This week, Bosnia-Herzegovina experienced its worst civil unrest since the end of the civil war in 1995. The protests were sparked by the sudden unemployment of the majority of Tuzla's employees following the closure and privatisation of a number of factories in the town. A crowd of 5,000 stormed a local government building, throwing furniture from the upper stories and clashing with police, leading to the injury of more than 130 people, mainly police officers. The protest spread to 20 cities and towns over the week and the movement has turned into a general protest against the government and a display of anger over the country's political and economic stagnation. Local media has reported that up to 200 people have been injured.

Clashes between the police and protesters continue with riot police using water cannons, tear gas and rubber bullets to disperse crowds. On 7 February, following an emergency meeting with regional security ministers and prosecutors, the prime minister of Bosnia's autonomous Bosniak-Croat federation, recognised the unfairness of the sacking of the Tuzla employees. However, he also accused protesters of hooliganism and made it clear that there would be repercussions for the destruction of property during the demonstrations. Meanwhile, the premiers of two of Bosnia's cantons, Sead Causevic of Tuzla and Munib Husejnagic of Zenica-Doboj, have resigned in light of the protests.

The protests stem from years of simmering discontentment over the economic and political situation in the country, which has been exacerbated by the political bickering between the three main ethnic groups, Bosniaks, Croats and Serbs, and has stifled governance and economic development since the civil war. As a result, Bosnia-Herzegovina's sluggish economy has suffered from mismanagement and corruption, and today, the country suffers from rising unemployment, which is currently at 27.5% and the highest amongst the Balkan countries. The population has therefore become sceptical of the government, which it believes is elite-driven and lacks the ability to improve the situation.

Other developments

An Azerbaijani soldier was shot dead by an Armenian army sniper during an exchange in fire on the frontline in Nagorno-Karabakh between Lower Karabakh and Zangezur in the South Caucasus. The death was announced by the defence ministry on Friday 7 February. The situation in the region remains tense and the 1994 ceasefire agreement has been violated dozens of times this year. The risks associated with travelling to the border areas between the two countries are high.

On 6 February, the US Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs, Victoria Nuland, was forced to issue an apology to EU counterparts following the publication of a video, in which the diplomat criticised the EU. A conversation between Nuland and the US Ambassador to Ukraine, Geoffrey Pyatt, had been recorded and uploaded to YouTube. In the discussion over international efforts to resolve the Ukrainian political crisis, Nuland is heard colourfully arguing that the United States should ignore the EU's position. In return, Angela Merkel's spokesperson released a statement emphasising Germany's heavy criticism of the comments and praising the work of the EU's foreign policy chief, Catherine Ashton. Meanwhile, the United States has accused Russia of recording and releasing the video and pointed out that the Russian deputy prime minister, Dmitry Rogozin, was among the first to tweet about the video before it came viral. Russia has yet to comment on the issue.

On 7 February, the Ukrainian interior minister, Vitaliy Zakharchenko, announced that the ministry believed that radical far-right groups were planning terror attacks in the country. Tensions between protesters and the government have subsided this last week since negotiations between the government and opposition began. On the same day, US Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland stated that the United States would be willing to offer Ukraine financial support if the Ukrainian government conducted constitutional and electoral reforms to alleviate the country's political crisis. The opposition has demanded early presidential and parliamentary elections as well as constitutional changes that would curb the president's power.

On the radar

- **Talks are expected to resume this week between Greek and Turkish Cypriots** on the reunification of Cyprus.
- **Planned student demonstrations to take place in Pristina, the capital of Kosovo, on 10 February.**
- **The French president, Francois Hollande, will visit Washington this week** in a bid to reinforce bilateral security and economic partnerships between the United States and France.
- **The European Union's foreign ministers to meet 10 February for emergency funding talks for Ukraine.**

Middle East

Saudi citizens to face long prison sentences if found fighting in foreign conflicts

On 3 February, Saudi Arabia announced a royal decree that would see Saudi citizens jailed for up to 20 years if found to be fighting in conflicts abroad. The royal decree also stated that citizens that endorse or give moral or material aid to groups that it classifies as terrorist or extremist organisations would face a prison sentence of up to 30 years. The announcement comes several days after the introduction of a new anti-terrorism law that includes any act that 'disturbs public order, shakes the security of society, or subjects its national unity to danger, or obstructs the primary system of rule or harms the reputation of the state'.

The introduction of the royal decree is an attempt to deter Saudi citizens from joining rebel fighters in Syria and posing a security risk upon their return. The interior ministry estimates that some 1,200 Saudis have travelled to Syria to fight against President Bashar al-Assad's regime. Previously, Saudi citizens who had travelled abroad to fight in Afghanistan and Iraq returned to carry out attacks inside the kingdom. Over the past decade, thousands of people have been imprisoned for allegedly working with al-Qaeda. However, human rights groups have argued that many of those convicted were actually guilty of calling for political change.

Saudi Arabia is a key regional ally of the United States and the dynasty rulers continue to be concerned by challenges to absolute rule and the rise of conservative Sunni doctrine throughout the Middle East. Under the new law, Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood and the Lebanese Shi'ite Hezbollah are likely to be classified as terrorist organisations. In the past, Saudi Arabia has condemned pro-Brotherhood demonstrations in Egypt as terrorism and has accused Hezbollah of acting on behalf of Iran. The new laws will be criticised by human rights groups as restricting freedom of expression and criticism of the royal family.

Other developments

There was a large explosion at a hotel in Peshawar, the capital of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan, on 4 February. The explosion killed nine people and injured a further 50 in the Shia dominated neighbourhood. Officials reported that it was a suicide attack. On the same day, a prominent Shia leader was assassinated at a market and an attack on a cinema on 2 February killed three people. Peshawar has been on the frontline in the struggle against Taliban militants and the situation remains volatile. Attacks on Shias and locations that are associated with immoral practices are likely to continue in the short term. Meanwhile, the Pakistani government held a formal meeting with representatives of the Taliban in Islamabad.

Al-Qaeda's successor to Osama bin Laden, Ayman al-Zawahiri, distanced the organisation from the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) in a statement released on 3 February. The statement claimed that al-Qaeda had no connection with the ISIL and that it is not responsible for the actions of the group. The number of foreign jihadi fighters operating under the ISIL in Syria has increased over the past year and the group has been accused of committing atrocities against Shi'ite and Alawite minorities. Moreover, the ISIL has clashed with other Islamic rebel groups in Syria because of their apparent interest in pursuing sectarian violence and the creation of a transnational caliphate. It is unlikely, however, that the announcement will reduce frictions between rival factions in Syria and Iraq.

The Syrian government was scheduled to dispatch a large shipment of chemical weapons on 5 February but failed to meet the deadline. This delay follows on from the missed deadline on 31 December 2013. The agreed timescale between Syria, the United Nations and the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons for the destruction of Syria's chemical weapons was accepted in September 2013. According to the agreement, more than 90% of Syria's chemical arsenal should have been shipped out, but it is believed that less than 5% of the total weapons have been dispatched. The Syrian government has blamed the delay on the civil war and has reiterated its commitment to destroying its chemical weapons by mid-2014.

On the radar

- **Geneva II talks are scheduled to resume on 10 February.** The UN backed peace talks are an attempt to bring Syria's civil war to an end.
- **The deadline for a deal made between Iran and the International Atomic Energy Agency will expire on 11 February.** Tehran must demonstrate that it has taken six practical steps towards curbing its nuclear programme.
- **11 February marks the third anniversary of the removal of the former Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak.**
- **Heightened security is expected in Sanaa, Yemen,** following the killing of a senior intelligence official on 9 February.
- **Anti-government demonstrations are possible in Manama, Bahrain,** on 14 February, which marks the anniversary of the 2011 uprising.

Polar regions

Russia's ambassador to the Arctic Council refutes claims of regional militarisation

Russia's ambassador to the Arctic Council, Anton Vasiliev, has denied the current global media speculation that Arctic states are seeking to militarise the Far North. The rebuttal, delivered in an interview to Russian state news agency ITAR-TASS, rested on two main assertions. First, the dispatching of military forces to the Arctic reflects a change in Arctic environmental and economic conditions that makes their presence necessary. Vasiliev noted that Russia's 20,000 kilometre border along its Arctic coast was once rendered impenetrable by ice but the continued retreat of summer ice levels has brought with it the threat of illegal emigration, organised crime and terrorism. He also mentioned the increasing economic activity of the Arctic Council states in their Far North, arguing that a military presence was essential to provide the necessary infrastructure for search and rescue operations. Second, Vasiliev claimed that the military build-up in the Arctic was a transparent process, which was 'aimed at no one' and pursued in a clear 'spirit of cooperation'.

Vasiliev's message will be received by many analysts as a further welcome antidote to the press speculation on an Arctic arms race, which often takes on a highly sensationalist tone. There is considerable evidence from recent exchanges at the international diplomatic and military levels that the spirit of cooperation cited by Vasiliev exists beyond rhetoric. For example, behind the highly visible recent Russian military build-up, the aggressive response to Greenpeace activists in the Arctic 30 case and Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper's discourse on Arctic sovereignty stands one barely reported event: the invitation of Russian observers to the Canadian military training exercise Operation Nanook. This indicates a level of military cooperation unimaginable in the Cold War period that doomsday journalists often invoke. The harsh climactic conditions and sparse populations of the Arctic region often mean that only national militaries have the capabilities for providing key infrastructure, particularly for search and rescue operations, and the logic of increased cooperation in this sphere in a period of increased economic activity is a powerful guarantee for peace. Furthermore, 2013 was a very successful year for the Arctic Council, whose authority and ability to promote peaceful diplomacy was given a further boost of approval by the large number of applications for observer status submitted by countries including China, South Korea, India and Japan.

Given the widespread consensus among expert Arctic-watchers that the risk of military conflict is low, what is to be made of the widely reported cases that seem to indicate otherwise? First, blame must be laid to a considerable extent on press sensationalism. Second, political analysts and international relations experts of a realist bent accustomed to seeing supranational organisations as superfluous have underestimated the scope for cooperation and the success of the Arctic Council. Finally, the significance of the cases highlighted above has often been misunderstood. In both Canada and Russia sabre-rattling speeches about projecting sovereignty into the Arctic are mainly intended for a domestic audience. Hence despite Vladimir Putin's and Harper's at times fiery rhetoric, Russian and Canadian diplomats publicly state that cooperation between the two Arctic giants has in fact never been closer. Until the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea finally rules over the possession of the vast underwater Lomonosov ridge, currently disputed by Russia, Canada and Denmark (through its territories in Greenland), there is little justification for doubting that this cooperation will continue.

Other developments

Swedish artists are protesting the plans of local government in the Far North to allow the construction of a mine in the Jokkmokk municipality. The artists boycotted the annual Jokkmokk Winter Market on 6 February, which attracts visitors from around the world with a range of cultural events and crafts showcasing the way of life of the indigenous Sami population. The Sami rely on reindeer herding for their economic sustenance and for the preservation of their culture, and the artists claim that the construction of the mine and related infrastructure will disrupt the traditional pastures on which the reindeer depend.

The Finnish ambassador to Norway called for cooperation between the two countries to construct a railway line through Finnish Lapland to the Norwegian Arctic coast. Speaking at a 4 February conference in Kirkenes, Norway, the ambassador claimed that leading politicians and industrialists in Helsinki are ready to back the project. The line would be a link not only between Arctic waters and the Nordic markets, but also with markets in Central Europe. As much as 20% of the investment could be covered by EU funding, in a project that the ambassador argues is essential for the region.

Finland's major political parties are backing a proposed increase in defence spending after 2015. Of the groups represented in the parliament, only the junior government partners the Left Alliance and Green League are opposed to the increase. According to estimates drawn up by Finnish defence command, the armed forces need an additional \$68 million (€50 million) in 2016 and another \$203 million (€150 million) by 2020 in order to remain effective at protecting Finnish sovereignty. A special parliamentary committee has been set up to review the defence force proposal.

On the radar

- **The 5th Polar Shipping Summit will be held on 26-27 February in London** to discuss technological, operational and logistical challenges faced by ship owners in harsh arctic conditions.
- **An International Arctic Investment Summit on 27 February** will invite international investors to consider the theme of the 'Northern Sea Route: Infrastructure and Transport-Communication Systems in the Arctic'.
- **Travellers to all Russian cities are advised on extra security precautions** that are to remain in place until 21 March in response to the heightened threat of terrorism around the Sochi Olympics.

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